

7. RECORD OF LARGE CONGREGATION OF LARGE WHISTLING-DUCK *DENDROCYGNA BICOLOR* IN THE PURBASTHALI-GANGES ISLETS, BURDWAN DISTRICT, WEST BENGAL¹

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Between January 26 and 28, 2007 I went to the Purbasthali-Ganga Islets for surveying waterbirds. During the survey I recorded a large number of Large Whistling-ducks *Dendrocygna bicolor* at various places in this freshwater river system. The Purbasthali-Ganga Islets is situated in the Burdwan district in West Bengal. The vast riverine of Purbasthali is located close to the Kashthashali in the Chupi Char along the River Ganga. This wetland complex is actually a cluster of riverine isles, ox-bow lakes and river channels. A large number of migratory waterbirds, especially waterfowl winter here.

On January 26, 2007 at 1015 hrs I first noticed a group of Large Whistling Ducks resting at the Kashthasali Char; I counted 895 individuals. Down the river at Idrakpur Char, another group of 780 individuals was recorded. Further down the river large groups of this species were found at Rajar

Char (1,020), Kamal Nagar Char (982) and Rukunpur Char (743). The total number recorded on January 26, 2007 was 4,420 individuals. On January 27 and 28, the total number of Large Whistling Ducks was found to be 4,190 and 4,367 individuals respectively.

The total breeding population of the Large Whistling Duck in South Asia is 20,000 (Wetlands International 2002). The present record of Large Whistling Ducks from the Purbasthali-Ganga Islets indicates that this wetland complex supports more than 20% of the existing population of Large Whistling-duck in South Asia. The Purbasthali-Ganga Islets, therefore meet the criteria to be protected and designated as an Important Bird Area under the A4i category (Islam and Rahmani 2004). The Purbasthali-Ganga Islets has been evaluated as a top priority for designation as a Ramsar site (Vijayan *et al.* 2004).

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8. TWO OBSERVATIONS OF MALAYAN NIGHT-HERON *GORSACHIUS MELANOLOPHUS* FROM WEST BENGAL, INDIA¹

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On May 03, 2005 around noon, Peter Logtmeijer (PL) and Wouter Puyk observed an adult Malayan Night-Heron *Gorsachius melanolophus* at Mahananda Wildlife Sanctuary (WLS) near Siliguri in Jalpaiguri district, West Bengal, India. The bird was flushed from near a fallen tree in a dry and stony riverbed in the eastern part of the Sanctuary, along the Siliguri -Kalimpong road. The Night-Heron was seen well at

a distance of 20-30 m before it disappeared into the forest. The first impression of the bird was that of a small Eurasian Bittern *Botaurus stellaris*, with a large head and stout bill, broad rounded wings and legs projecting behind the tail. It looked smaller in size than a Black-crowned Night-Heron *Nycticorax nycticorax*. The upperparts and sides of the neck were rufous-brown except for the black crown/crest, which

reached down to the neck. The wing coverts were also rufous-brown, with the primaries and secondaries appearing black. The primary coverts and/or the base of the primaries showed distinct white barring.

On February 03, 2006 before dawn, AT and MR watched birds from a bridge crossing a small stream inside Baikuntapur Forest, which adjoins the south-eastern part of Mahananda WLS. The stream had dried up except for two large puddles near the bridge. While watching a number of passerines, including the White-tailed blue Robin *Myiomela leucura*, the Pale-chinned Flycatcher *Cyornis polioegenys* and the Snowy-browed Flycatcher *Ficedula hyperythra*, dropping in for a bath, AT spotted a small stocky night-heron slowly moving towards us underneath a line of bushes at the edge of the stream. The initial distance was about 30 m. The head, neck and breast were rich rufous, the crown and the longish crest were black. Upperparts and wings showed dark vermiculations on rufous background. Foreneck and breast showed black streaking, and the belly was whitish with dark markings. The short, stout bill was yellowish; eyes were yellow with black pupils. The facial skin and legs showed bluish-green coloration. The bird was easily identified as an adult Malayan Night-Heron. We watched it through binoculars and a telescope down to a distance of 15 m, as it slowly moved along the pond in search of food for about 20 minutes, after which it got too dark. It showed a very striking behaviour, constantly moving the neck slowly sideways, describing a sinuous line.

Both observations were in subtropical lowland evergreen Sal forests, which are veined by a mosaic of rivers and small streams. The soil is covered with low shrubbery, while mid-height vegetation is scarce and mainly found along streams.

The Malayan Night-Heron is locally distributed in India, China, Southeast Asia and the Philippines, and is migratory, at least in the northern parts of its range. It is generally uncommon and secretive, living in swampy areas in dense lowland broad-leaved evergreen and mixed deciduous

forests, and feeding mainly at night. In the Indian subcontinent, where it is local and scarce, it is said to be resident or partly resident in the Western Ghats and the central and southern Nicobar Islands, and a summer visitor in the area of Assam Valley to Manipur. In Sri Lanka, it is a regular winter visitor (Rasmussen and Anderton 2005). However, it has not previously been reported from West Bengal, and records from the north-eastern states of India are scarce. In Assam, it occurs among other places, in Kaziranga National Park, where it is said to be an uncommon migrant (Barua and Sharma 1999), Nameri National Park (rare migrant; Barua and Sharma 2005) and Dibru-Saikhowa National Park (rare; Choudhury 1997; Choudhury 1998). Malayan Night-Heron has also been reported from Nagaland, Manipur, Mizoram and Meghalaya (Choudhury 2001; Birand and Pawar 2004).

Our two observations from West Bengal are from locations about 10 km apart and are connected by a continuous protected forest. The Mahananda WLS and adjoining Baikuntapur Forest provide good habitat for the species, where it may occur regularly and perhaps even breeds, but hitherto it has been overlooked in the area due to its secretive habits. Intriguingly, the species is considered a summer visitor in India outside the Western Ghats and the Nicobar Islands. The north-east Indian population of Malayan Night-Heron is said to migrate south through the Haflong district (Ali 1962) and Burma (=Myanmar) between August and October, probably wintering in the Malay Peninsula (Glenister 1951) and Greater Sundas. Passage through the Malay Peninsula has been noted in October-December and April, and wintering birds have been recorded in Sumatra from November to May (del Hoyo *et al.* 1992). Our observation from early February is clearly out of season and may in fact be the first winter record of this species from the north-eastern part of India. We strongly recommend further search for the secretive and easily overlooked Malayan Night-Heron in the Mahananda WLS and neighbouring forests to resolve questions about its local status.

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